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ABSTRACT

"Helping Hand" programs involve the physical identification of stores, homes, restaurants and other establishments to which children on their way to and from school may go for assistance and/or safety. Identification cards are placed in windows of cooperating establishments and homes. In some communities home owners "watch the block" during peak school traffic hours. When children require assistance, people in these places can call a special number at the school or the police. In another variation, homes and business establishments display the hand as a "safe haven" children may seek. This bulletin addresses how to implement such a program. (Author/MLF)

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Technical Assistance Bulletin

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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"Helping Hand" Type Programs

Summary

These programs of community participation involve the physical identification of stores, homes, restaurants and other establishments in which children on their way to and from school may go for assistance and/or safety. Identification cards are placed in windows of cooperating establishments and homes. In some communities home owners "watch the block" during peak school traffic hours. When children require assistance, people in these places can call a special number at the school or the police. In another variation, homes and business establishments display the hand as a "safe haven" children may seek.

The Problem

In almost all schools in the U.S., some children are "assaulted" on the way to or from school. In some cases the assaults are in the nature of teasing and harassment of one student by others. In other cases, there are assaults with weapons for various reasons, ranging from hostility to robbery. In some schools the act of getting to school is tantamount to "running a gauntlet." Most commonly, lunch money is extorted, but occasionally sexual assaults and other much more serious crimes ensue. The climate of fear that is created amongst the students is not at all conducive to sound education, creates ill will amongst the parents, and de facto inhibits school attendance. (In many states, therefore, a secondary effect is reduction of state aid to the school system based on average daily attendance.) In some schools teachers and other staff are also the victims of various attacks, assaults, and intimidation.

For most schools there are a number of routes of access that children and staff take. Police resources can rarely be spared, and even with police and security staff available, typically not all of the access routes can be covered. If people are being menaced or feel intimidated, there is usually nowhere for them to go.

The Solution

The key to the Helping Hand Program is the identification of places where children can go for assistance. This identification is generally accomplished by placing a placard in the window with a symbol that all children are taught to recognize -- most often a large red handprint. Children being teased, attacked, or intimidated are taught that they can go to any place with a red hand in the window and there will be someone there who will "let them in" and assist them in obtaining whatever help may be necessary.

The Helping Hand type programs are community participation programs. They rely on obtaining sufficient numbers of neighborhood volunteers. Private homes are most often used. Retail stores and restaurants are also excellent choices because access to them is quick and immediate. The degree of participation required can vary according to a community's needs and the volunteers' desires. A private home owner who wishes to cooperate may not want to feel that he/she must be available at all times. Some people may not be free each morning. Others may be available in the mornings but not the afternoons. By simply placing the placard in the window or door when available and removing it when not, the cooper-

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ating citizen is not "tied down," and it becomes easier to enlist this volunteer.

The original Helping Hand Program -- the earliest model of this type of program -- was initiated by the Citizens Forum, Incorporated of Indianapolis, Indiana, in the mid-1960's. Since then it has been adopted by many schools, and several variations are operational as well. The Citizens Forum Helping Hand Program includes other citizens' help activities, such as neighborhood clean up campaigns, community action programs, and the like. Information is available from the Citizens Forum (see References section). However, the elements that this bulletin addresses are specifically those dealing with the safety and assistance provided to school children and staff going to and from school.

Implementing Helping Hand Type Programs

The first step in implementing such programs is to enlist the volunteers. Where there is an existing neighborhood organization or neighborhood program devoted to other activities, it is easiest to go through them. Chambers of Commerce and other cross-sectional organizations are also useful. An individual staff member who is taking the responsibility for the implementation of the program at the school level can simply traverse the routes taken by children and knock on doors asking for volunteers. In the final analysis this is often the best way. The PTA is also a source of volunteers in that many parents live in the immediate neighborhood of the school and have a more than casual interest in cooperating.

Ideally, people who volunteer should receive a minimum of three physical documents. First, a letter of thanks and appreciation should be sent signed by the school principal, or even by the school superintendent or the mayor of the city thanking that individual for his/her willingness to cooperate in the program. This is important in solidifying the commitment. A typical sample letter is provided as Source Document A. A second document is the placard or placards themselves. These should be printed on heavy paper or index card stock. A standard 8½ x 11" seems to be a good size. The hand symbol should be printed on one side and instructions as to the telephone numbers to call in case of a problem should be printed on the reverse. A "camera-ready" mechanical of an open hand symbol is provided as Source Document B. This can be taken to a local printer or quick copy speed printer with instructions to print on card stock. The artwork can be modified as appropriate. The third document that should be provided is a set of instructions as to what should be done under various circumstances. In general, experience has shown that the best role for the citizens is simply to help the child who is in trouble. By utilizing the telephone and calling on behalf of the child and requesting somebody from the school or police come to provide assistance, the citizen has done his job. Source Document C illustrates the procedures developed by the Carver and Penrose Elementary Schools in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

Procedures for Dealing with Serious Problems

Attempts to have citizens mediate disputes, break up fights, or provide first aid (except to stop obvious bleeding) and the like are not particularly effective. First, they scare off volunteers who feel that the job is too much for them. Second, most volunteers are not really equipped by training or experience to render these forms of assistance. If a child comes to a home or business establishment and is seriously injured, the instructions should be to call for an ambulance first and call the school second. If the volunteer is unsure of the seriousness of the injury, he/she should call the school and get the school nurse involved to reach a decision. Too much responsibility cannot be placed on the volunteer. Each school must develop a set of instructions that pertain to situations involving police, hospitals, school members, etc.

Prompt, effective follow-up calls from volunteers is important. Some schools do not have sufficient telephone capacity that the caller in an emergency is guaranteed an open line. If this kind of access is a problem, the school may wish to consider having a special telephone line installed for just this purpose. The cost is relatively modest and the benefit can be substantial. The basic communications principle is volunteers calling with problems should not get busy signals too often. This tends to increase anxiety levels and build a perception that they are "holding the bad" and not getting the help from the school that was promised.

School Organization and Procedures

At the school level a coordinator of the program should be assigned. This coordinator

can maintain relationships with the various volunteers, maintain the roster of the volunteers and their locations, and see to it that telephones are manned during the morning hours and afternoon hours when the children are going to and from school (lunch hours, as well, if students go out for lunch) and provide coordination with other school resources when a call comes in. The school must be prepared to make a relatively rapid response when a call comes in, if appropriate. Typical responses might include:

- Sending a staff member or older students to escort the frightened child from the helping hand volunteer's location to the school.
- Dispatching the school nurse to determine whether or not an injury is serious.
- Dispatching a staff member to coordinate with hospitals and inform parents in the case of a serious injury, and to coordinate with police where appropriate.

A log should be kept of all calls that come in from the special number and all actions taken. The coordinator may want to make phone calls or send letters to each volunteer for each act of assistance.

Another element that should be considered is the printing and preparation of certificates of appreciation for cooperation. Individuals as well as business establishments like to frame these and put these on the wall. A typical sample of a certification is provided as Source Document D.

Issues and Concerns

Potential problems that can be encountered with the helping hand problem are relatively few. One to consider is that the organizational drive to get volunteers may end up with a distribution of volunteers that is uneven in terms of the geography of the area surrounding the school. A street map with pins or flags to indicate volunteers is a very useful way to analyze the situation. Different colored push pins for private homes and retail establishments and restaurants are desirable. Ideally, there should be a volunteer location or establishment at least every one hundred (100) yards on the typically heavy traffic thoroughfares. Recognizing that some individuals may not be available at all times, there can be some "uncovered" stretches along the thoroughfares. Individual solicitation of volunteers based on location should be a follow-up to any other kind of organizing effort to fill in the "bare spots."

Another problem for schools that wish to implement "flexible" volunteer schedules is that the individuals who are usually available at their location may afix the placards in a semi-permanent way. Then on occasions when they are not available, they may forget to take the placard out of the window. The coordinators should periodically have somebody walk the routes and check to make sure that the places with placards are truly open. This need not be done in an "inspection mode." Rather, the school person can drop by and thank everybody for their cooperation in the program, and in the case where no one is home, follow-up with a phone call later.

Another potential problem in urban areas is the possible reluctance of community residents to open their doors or homes to teenage children in need of help. They may feel intimidated or are afraid of the older, larger youngsters. This reluctance should be recognized by school coordinators, and a compromise be reached.

Coordination between children and staff, volunteers and parents is sometimes a problem. Experience has shown that one cannot overkill the amount of information going out. Typical methods of going over the program include:

- PTA meetings
- Home room teachers communicating with their students
- School assemblies
- Newspaper articles
- Radio and television interviews
- Letters to the parents asking them to remind their children about the program.

The latter is a particularly good technique in that it not only aids the children in using the service, but also reduces the level of anxiety and fear by having parents know that the school is doing something and there are provisions made for potentially dangerous situations.

Another problem that occurs is the attrition of volunteers. If a particular volunteer location gets too much traffic, volunteering becomes a burden. If it gets almost none at all, it is a bore. In both types of situations, people should be motivated to stay with the program. In the case of too much

traffic the immediate solution is to recruit other volunteers in the immediate physical areas to spread the burden around. The density of volunteers is a function of empirical results and experience. In the case of too little activity, phone calls, letters of appreciation, and certificates all help, as well as personal visits. One element to consider is taking out newspaper ads every semester or so, acknowledging the appreciation of the work of the volunteers and listing the names of the business establishments and/or individuals involved. In some communities, newspapers can be approached to run the names as a public service activity. Newspapers will very often respond to the argument that when there is violence in schools, the newspapers will give a large amount of space to reporting the problem, and now that citizens are doing a great deal to prevent violence, it deserves just a little bit of space and some recognition to those people.

Results

While there have been no formal evaluations, that we know of, of the various helping hand type programs, many of the schools utilizing the idea report of a great deal of satisfaction on the part of the school authorities as well as parent groups, students, and faculty. One indicator of success is the history of the Washington, D.C. program. There a single teacher, Mrs. Ann Wooten, went to Indianapolis, Indiana, to observe a Citizens Forum sponsored program in action and came back and installed a program in the Shaed Elementary School in Washington. Shortly, this was expanded to another school in Washington, and currently is being instituted in all the elementary schools in the system. The decision to expand has been based on a perceived reduction of the number of incidents and the conviction that the very act of having helping hand type safe locations reduces the anxiety level of the students.

Replication Issues

The helping hand-type program is utilizable at elementary, junior, and senior high school levels, although it is most frequently found at the elementary school level, with parents "watching the block" as well as providing a haven. It is not readily implementable in areas where there are few appropriate structures (houses, business, etc.) within a one-mile radius of the school. The larger the population of students who walk to school, the more helpful the helping hand program becomes.

Required Resources

The major resource required is that of a coordinator at the school level. Typically, this might be a one-quarter to one-half time job for a single individual. Other resources include the time school staff need to spend to respond to problem situations (although this time would be required in any event).

The placards generally will cost about $50 to print. The cost of a special telephone line should also be included, if it will be needed. Typically, this could run $10 to $50 a month, depending on how many lines are utilized, plus an installation cost. There is some secretarial burden in mailing out letters and certificates of appreciation, etc. Last, if newspaper advertising is to be considered, the cost of local advertising space should be figured into the program. In general, helping hand programs can be run for well under $1,000 per school per year.

References

Citizens Forum, Incorporated
2735 North Illinois Street
Indianapolis, Indiana 46208
(317) 923-5252

The Forum has a 'kit' available which describes the Helping Hand program they developed (cost $25). It is a valuable resource for implementing a "block watch" version of the program, and offers other useful suggestions for citizen action, including ways to seek local funding.

Dear _____:

We want to take this opportunity to express our appreciation for your willingness to participate in our Hand of Safety Program for the 1979/80 school year. The well-being of our school children as they travel to and from school is as important to us as their well-being while they are in school. By involving members of the community in our efforts to insure their well-being enroute, we know that we have increased the likelihood that they will indeed be safer.

Again, we thank you for your cooperation and feel a little more secure knowing that you are looking out for our school children.

Sincerely,

Principal
Superintendent
Mayor

Source Document B

THIS HOME OFFERS A

HELPING HAND

CARVER AND PENROSE ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Dear Parents,

In an effort to coordinate the anti-vandalism programs of Carver and Penrose and Sabin Schools, we are asking you to read the following:

This is designed to be a common-sense plan for residents of Village Seven. If used, when necessary, this plan should curtail child menacing, vandalism and general crime. This plan is not to frighten you, or your children, it is to help Village Seven residents come together as a community to help our area become a more beautiful place to live.

To accomplish this aim requires that people know what to do if an incident occurs. The following is a checklist of what to do; please read it, post it on your bulletin board, and go over it with your children.

1. Review the helping hand program. Remind your child that the hand in the window is a sign of safety and help. But, the most important thing is to become a reliable witness.

Important clues to look for are:

1. Hair color
2. Eye color
3. Clothes
4. Scars or unusual speech or accent
5. Was the person carrying anything
6. Where did it happen
7. What time of day
8. Any other circumstances

2. If a menacing incident occurs the following should be done:

1. Call the police
2. Call Sabin Jr. High School to have Mr. Eitel log the incident on the area map.
3. Call the school, of the grade you believe the attacker to be, so they may assist you with identification.
4. Make positive identification.
5. Take the advice of authorities (police, school, etc.)
6. If criminal charges are brought, it is of the utmost importance that they be carried out. The ability to identify the person is the most important thing.

3. If vandalism is witnessed you should call the police and the appropriate school principal.

The only way menacing, vandalism, and general crime can be prevented is for all people of our community to be responsible. If you are asked to press charges, please do so.

An open meeting will be held at Penrose Elementary School, 4285 S. Nonchalant Circle, at 7:30 p.m. October 10, 1978 to hear Lt. Carner, Colorado Springs Police Department speak on the NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH PROGRAM.

Certificate of Appreciation

Presented to

_____

in recognition of service as a volunteer for the

Mizpah School District's Helping Hand Program
1979

_____ _____

Program Coordinator Superintendent